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A GLANCE AT THE AMERICAN STAGE, AND "SEMIRAMIS AND OTHER PLAYS"

The quality of long-suffering on the part of the American public is revealed in many things, but in none does it approach so nearly the heroic as in its tolerance of the conditions that exist in the theatrical world. The hope that this country would in due time bring forth a dramatic expression worthy of its greatness has faded into doubt, a doubt that in the minds of many has vanished into downright disbelief. The great American drama, like the great American novel, has ceased to be a myth — it has become a joke.

Just why this is so, is not easy to determine. To the casual glance there is apparently no reason why a nation which has run the whole gamut of nationality within the space of a hundred years should not have given birth to a single truly splendid play. It is, of course, idle to think that art, or, indeed, the art impulse, will develop as rapidly as the more material elements of the nation, yet if the conditions of to-day be compared with the drama-creative epochs of the past, it will appear that externally, at least, our age has much in common with them, and logically should produce just such florescence.

If then the conditions of growth and soil are favorable, the fact that the American drama does not spring into flower and fruit must be due to negative forces that are inhibiting its development. That these exist there can be no question, and the thing that fosters them is the fact that the Captains of Industry have gained control of the stage. The drama of America is not an art — it is a business.

That an age of industrial expansion *per se* need not have a deleterious influence upon art is manifestly true; indeed, the debt that art owes such a spirit is beyond measure. Art, particularly dramatic art, has oftentimes flourished greatly in epochs of commercial expansion, but never as a part of such expansion, nor, indeed, as a result of it, but coeval with it. The soil of nationality brings forth with equal perfection the violet of beauty as well as the oak of use; but should the oak in his strength strive to play the violet's part, the result would be disastrous —

to the violet, at least. In such wise have the unspiritual and wooden arms of modern business clasped the stage of America.

Apparently organization, the secret of modern financial marvels, has been the cause, in the case of the drama, of intolerable conditions; and the end is not in view yet. For some eight or nine years the American stage has been in the hands of a few men, who, if report does not belie them, are better equipped to manage stock-yards and street-railways than to control the output of the American theatre, and to direct its policy. In 1896, Messrs. Klaw and Erlanger, who, up to that time had run a booking agency, or bureau for routing plays and for supplying actors with situations, gained control of the theatres of the country. This they did by guaranteeing the managers and proprietors a definite number of drawing plays. Armed with their contracts they held the key to the dramatic situation. No play could be given throughout the country unless its manager came to the Syndicate's terms. Otherwise the best playhouses were closed to it, only to be opened for a consideration, to wit: fifty per cent of the profits of each night's performance, to which they added a five per cent tax on the proceeds of the theatre for the entire season.

That fifty-five per cent profit, without the slightest risk being involved, should be enough to satisfy the most sanguine no one can gainsay, but we could forgive the members of the Syndicate if they had confined themselves to their profits alone; but no, with the divine yearning of Alexander, they must pine for worlds unconquered, even the world of art. They needs must establish themselves as fosterers and censors of the drama. What their ideals are is best expressed by the words of the best-known of the group, Mr. Charles Frohman: "The chief object," he says in *Harper's Weekly* for Dec. 31, 1904, "of the manager is to entertain. The audience is in the theatre chiefly to be entertained, and the manager feels perfectly satisfied if he can secure a play that will meet that purpose, leaving the question of instruction entirely out of consideration. In my opinion the people do not, as a rule, take the theatre very seriously, and they are not particularly eager for instruction at so much a seat."

Although the spirit of this quotation is essentially mercen-

ary, we cannot find much fault with it if we grant the validity of Mr. Frohman's point of view; yet we cannot escape the logical inference regarding the real source of the manager's "satisfaction."

The "Robe of the Invisible," however, is wholly cast aside in an article contributed by Mr. Marc Klaw to the December *Cosmopolitan*. "The situation," he avers, "is to my mind akin to other purely commercial enterprises. I do not believe that the shopper knows the name of the man whose ingenuity figured out the style of skirt which fashion tells her to wear this season. Yet she wears the skirt, and the skirt is a success. The diner-out seldom knows to what individuality he is indebted for the grateful sauce which heightens the flavor of his lamb. Cooks, manufacturers, and theatrical managers are not dependent for their success upon the endorsement of their patrons, personally given. The fact that the articles in which they deal are accepted by the public is sufficient. . . . The great source of such trouble as has arisen in American theatricals has been the fact that many of the newspapers, and many of the men who do not understand their subject, have accused us of commercialism, but declined to treat us as a commercial organization."

This, of course, about the art that Hegel considers to be one of the purest expressions of a nation's spiritual life. The naïve admission in the latter part of the quotation is refreshing. For the opponents of the Syndicate to treat it as a commercial enterprise would be like throwing Brer Rabbit into the briar patch. Nothing could please its members better, for to do so would be to confess the validity of their claim. The Trust seeks to minimize or ignore the chief contention of its critics, which is that other conditions besides those of business must inevitably enter into the field of the drama. One feels, to paraphrase a cleverness of Fra Elbertus, that it would be as reasonable to attempt a monopoly of love as strive to corner a field of art.

That the public and the playwright are negligible quantities in the whole affair is further indicated by Mr. Klaw's words:

"The theatre is not primarily an educator of the public. Many good folk think so, but this is not so. It is not so because there hasn't been any demand by the public that it should be educated. Let the demand once be apparent, and the desired response will immediately follow. The theatre is governed by the rules and observances of all other commercial enterprises. It is not to dictate to the public taste. It is but to satisfy the public demand. While even such a purely business undertaking must be hedged about with the essential suggestions of artistic requirement, I do not believe that the public demands of us that we give up our commercialism. Moreover the public would have no such right.

"No syndicate of theatrical managers may ever hope to shape the public sentiment. As I said before, the stage is not educational. It is receptive. We have to give what the public wants. And it is hard to forecast, even approximately, what the public will want. All that we may say of the next favorite is that it must be new. So much we know. With us Americans it is the newest restaurant, the latest book, the newest play. The method which best meets this condition is the method which must succeed. . . . It is only by giving the closest attention to conditions that we are able to form the vague idea—which must answer in lieu of something more definite, and unattainable—of the public taste from which we are to draw our conclusions and shape our plans."

The cloven hoof, however, is shamelessly displayed in another statement of Mr. Klaw to the effect that "I don't think for one single moment that the public knows what they want. I give them what I think they ought to have."

"The theatre in the United States is not a public institution, and it is about time some one said so."

The astonishing inconsistencies involved in the foregoing published statements stand clearly before us, and may be summed up as follows: first, the public must have what it desires; second, as the Trust has to prepare in advance for its productions it must foresee what the public will desire six months hence, thus they create the fashion and not the public; third, the pub-

lic doesn't really know what it wants; fourth, what has the public to do with the theatre after all?¹

The effect of such ideals has been disastrous. Not only has the public taste been corrupted and demoralized, but the standard of playwriting has been sensibly lowered. The policy of buying cheap and selling dear has been responsible for ill-trained and poorly paid actors, and for plays that are nothing but degraded adaptations of foreign popular successes, with here and there a production by an American playwright, the melodramatic qualities of which are barely concealed by its tinsel cleverness. Idealism in an actor or playwright is at a discount, and is discouraged to extinction. Flashy posters, and methods, "out of all whooping," of advertising plays are depended upon to take the place of genuine expressions of the dramatist's art.

Yet the law that evil is self-destructive seems to hold good in the present case. So outrageous have been the abuses on the part of the Theatrical Trust, so ruthless have they been in suppressing their competitors, and so careless of the true welfare of the public that at last protests have been heard on all sides. In New York, however, the struggle has become so intense that the Syndicate's playhouses have been closed to the dramatic critics who have had the hardihood to suggest that Denmark was not all sweet and clean. Persecutions of the most mediæval sort have been visited upon the actors and playwrights who have incurred the ire of the gods, and when any determined stand has been taken against them, no means have been too petty to destroy their opponents. Through it all they have preserved a most diplomatic silence, which has at last been broken by the most tragic thing that could occur — the revelation of diminishing box-receipts. For that patient creature, the long-suffering public, is at last awakening to the numerous shell-games that are being played on him, and, in the case of the theatre, is showing his disapproval by staying away from the "Rogers Brothers in Khamchatka" and other things of that ilk.

¹ If more argument were needed, the revelations in the Supreme Court in New York City in the case of *Belasco vs. Klaw and Erlanger*, in April of this year, after this article was written, would supply the needed material for the attitude and power of the Theatrical Trust.

That the public is tired of being gulled by the abominations yearly thrust upon it, is shown by the unprecedented revival of interest in Shakespearian plays; a cause for rejoicing on the part of the public, and no less so on the part of the actor who finds in them at last an adequate medium for the expression of his art.

The members of the Syndicate aver that they import their plays because no good ones are written by American authors. Is this, indeed, true? Are the talking gowns of Clyde Fitch, the eternal cigar of William Gillette, and Augustus Thomas's "dramatization of the map of the United States," the high-water marks of the American drama? Apparently there are some sincere people in the land who think otherwise, for there is a movement under way to organize a national subsidized theatre, the object of which will be to foster rather than destroy the American drama and the American playwright. It will strive to do the very things the Trust is afraid to do; seek out new talent and give it a chance to spread its wings, for by such means alone shall we obtain adequate and vital representation of the pageant of modern life.

The splendid use that the novelist is making of these materials is evidence that men and women of insight are capable of transforming them into art. The works of Miss Glasgow are themselves examples of powerful and moving dramatic creations, which now and then rise to astonishing heights of tragic beauty. With but slight modification of her technique there is no question but that she could write masterly plays.

Again the charge made by the Syndicate that there are no native playwrights is abundantly disproved by the publishing houses at least. Many good plays are being written and published every year, among which are works of such noteworthy force and beauty that one wonders why they are not given a trial on the stage in the stead of the trivial stuff that passes current.

This question is especially insistent when reading the plays of Mrs. Olive Tilford Dargan, recently published by Brentano. Among the dramatic efforts of to-day they stand with a particu-

lar crown of glory on their brow. It takes the most cursory examination of these plays to realize that a poet of exceptional genius dwells among us, who needs but encouragement and experience to take her place among the creative spirits of America. In spite of faults, many of which, however, are but passing and remediable defects, her "Semiramis and Other Plays" is the most remarkable first volume of plays yet brought forth in this country. Full of charm and interest when read by the study lamp, they would gain immeasurably by being given their true setting on the stage.

The first of the three plays, which gives its name to the title of the book, is founded upon the legend of the warrior queen of Assyria, Semiramis. In Mrs. Dargan's hands the grim old story with its David and Uriah theme has undergone a wonderful transformation. With the instinct of the artist she has rejected the situation in which the husband of Semiramis was betrayed by King Ninus, and in the play it is the father who is sacrificed, his fall being in part due to a defect in his own character, owing to which he flees and leaves his army without a leader at the critical moment of the battle. The day, however, is saved by his daughter Semiramis, who rallies the soldiers and beats back the opposing Armenians, capturing Khosrove, the son of the Armenian king. Khosrove, however, during the battle had seen Semiramis, and because of her beauty and courage has fallen in love with her, which love he reveals in lines of especial poetic quality:

Suddenly
A missile struck your helmet and dislodged
The glory of your face before my eyes.
Your hair ran gold, the shining East looked black
Behind the star you made upon its breast!
I knew thee for a goddess, and stood still,
Meek captive to thy wish.

In the old legend, Semiramis is the daughter of Derceto, the Assyrian Astarte, yet Mrs. Dargan has avoided stressing the idea of her divine ancestry. With the instinct of the artist she has felt the necessity for humanizing the character as much as possible, lest the inclusion of the godlike element should pro-

duce an effect of aloofness. When this phase of the character is dwelt upon in the play it is not made a means by which she resolves her difficulties, but rather serves as an explanation of those very elements of power and beauty that lifted Semiramis to the throne of Assyria.

The play has some interesting collisions of duty, yet at times we feel as if a certain quality of spirituality were absent. Our sympathy is clearly with Semiramis when she chooses to save the life of her father rather than that of her brother, and also when she dedicates herself to her nation instead of a treacherous king or even a noble lover; yet at times we feel that these crises in her life are not strongly led up to, nor adequately motivated. The change of scenes is so rapid that at times it is bewildering. However, in spite of these defects the play would make a splendid dramatic spectacle, with its Oriental radiance of color and poetry, and its heroic figures moving against the background of the palaces and towers of Nineveh.

From time to time the play rises to astonishing heights of poetic beauty. Particularly effective is the speech of Khosrove in which he pleads the cause of love against that of power and wealth:

KHOSROVE.

Hard are the lips
That never know a kiss, and thine were made
With softness of the rose! Though all the streams
Of power on earth poured to thy sovereign sea,
Still wouldst thou want, and empty be thy heart
One drop of blood would fill.

SEMIRAMIS.

You speak

As to a woman!

KHOSROVE.

Ay, for so thou art!
Be now thyself! Thy peace alone I plead!
I can bear all but thy unhappiness!
For love—true love—forgets itself and makes
But one prayer unto heaven—prayer for the good
Of the beloved!

.

Then
 Our rosy hours have been the pick of time,
 And hung a flower 'mong withered centuries
 When every age had brought its reckoning in!
 O, why will we, some cubits high, pluck at
 The sun and moon, when we have that within
 Makes us the soul and center of heaven itself?

"Carlotta," the second play in the volume, is based upon the unfortunate endeavor of Napoleon III, to found an empire in Mexico. It has neither the unity and movement of Semiramis nor the glamour that the personality of Poe lends to "The Poet," yet it has a lyric quality possessed by neither. The tremendous length of the play, its abrupt and sometimes startling changes of scene, joined with certain deficiencies inherent in the theme itself, tend to render the play unfit for the stage. Maximilian and his consort, Carlotta, are essentially pathetic and not tragic figures. The victims of chance and external condition, we fail to enter into their lives nor feel more than an impersonal kind of pity for them in their disasters.

Their characters, however, are portrayed with exceptional clearness and skill, and the whole play is bathed in a splendid flood of poetry. In the first scene the source of her inspiration is revealed by the invocation to Shakespeare:

CHARLES.

Come, Shakespeare, magic mason, build me worlds
 That never shake, however winds may blow,
 Founded on dream imperishable.

MARIA.

Put by your Englishman!
 Come, put him by, I say! He's dead; we live.
 He's had his due and passed.

CHARLES.

Nay, his account
 Is writ forever current: His book of praise
 Time closes not, but waits some language new
 To enter it, and at his monument
 Fame yet stands carving.

What a dainty conceit is the following passage addressed to Carlotta's glove:

O, little finger casements, do you mourn
Your pretty tenants lost?—five rose-sweet nuns
That pray at one white shrine!

Now and then the verse takes on a larger utterance, as if the writer were aspiring to the expression of profounder harmonies of thought and word:

These hands have known
That blessed of all fortunes—to toil for love!
These eyes that sought for but a face more fair,
A flower more sweet, have found the stars that rise
Where Truth and Courage wander in the night!
In Southern vales, maybe, we'll hear again
The morning birds sing at our bowered windows,
But we will not forget the nobler song
Now borne by winds about these mountain peaks;
The song of man made free!

.

The shy and tender Dawn creeps up in fear
Lest Night has laid some blight upon the world,
But finding all is well, steps forth, and lo!
Out of her courage the great sun is born:
So doth the heart look outward after grief
To find the world all dark, but nay, the light
Is more of heaven than it was before,
Because a face is shining from the clouds.
You dim your loved one's eyes in paradise
With your earth tears.

In "The Poet," Mrs. Dargan makes a dramatic study of the career and personality of Edgar Allan Poe, the mystery of whom has troubled the waters of criticism for many decades. The theme is evidently dear to the writer's heart, yet her interpretation of the hapless poet's life will not be convincing to many who find the endeavor to explain the artist's self by his works at the best an unsatisfactory sort of thing. To all intents there are three distinct Poes: he of "The Raven" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," the demoniac genius of the Griswold legend, and last the Poe revealed to us by the facts of his life—a man who suffered and toiled, meeting as best he could the

strokes of fate and unkind men. Nor does Mrs. Dargan make her portrayal of Poe entirely clear and convincing. When the play is done we do not know whether Poe was one who shaped his tragic fate by his own irresponsible deeds, whether he was indeed that "unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster followed fast and followed faster," or whether he was, after all, just a madman. All of these contradictory elements are distilled to form the Poe of the play.

Mrs. Dargan has endeavored to give unity to the character, and whether she has succeeded in this very difficult task she, at least, has created an unusual and fascinating personality, giving us what may be a more just portrayal of the real Poe than that we find in the biographies and histories of American literature. Some of the scenes are of exceptional power, particularly the one between Poe and Helen in the first act, the dialogue between Poe and his child-wife, Virginia, in the third act, the night of his watch over Virginia's body, and the last night of all in Baltimore. These are veritable creations of dramatic art, marked by a vividness, sympathy and reserve rarely found in the literary work of to-day.

The humor of this play is more spontaneous than in the others, and is used with better effect, the scenes in which it occurs giving contrast and relief to what would otherwise be an exceedingly depressing recital. Those who understand why Hawthorne built his study and workroom on the top of his house, will readily enter into the spirit of the scene wherein Poe flies from domestic turmoil and the nagging of insistent callers.

The play is written in prose, thus differing from the others, which are in blank verse, losing somewhat in rhythmic utterance and poetic fancy; gaining, largely, however, in force and ease. Here and there lyrics are sprinkled throughout the scenes, some from Poe's own poems, which are used with excellent effect; yet not less charming are the lyrics from Mrs. Dargan's pen, as the following quotation will evidence:

Like a fallen star on the breast of the sea
My lover rests on the heart of me;

The lord of the tempest hies him down
From his billow-crest to his cavern throne,
And 'tis peace as wide as eye can see
When my lover rests on the heart of me.

That these plays have faults no one can gainsay, but that the faults are overshadowed by their innumerable excellencies is equally beyond question. The defects are those of craftsmanship and are remediable, and will be in time, for Mrs. Dargan's work has the saving quality of sincerity and uplift. Her virtues are those that are needed for the regeneration of the American stage. The lightness that cannot be moved to look on great and solemn things; the pessimism that hails downright realism as the loftiest art expression; and that bestial conception which measures art by the purse-strings, must all give way to an idealism that never falters, and an art that is grounded in the greatness of the masters of the past, with which is joined a message of truth and spirituality to the present.

It may be that Shakespeare would have stopped writing had his earlier plays not been presented, but the stage was his school and through it he was educated out of the crudenesses and affectations of "The Comedy of Errors" and "Love's Labour's Lost," attaining at last the glorious technique of "Othello" and "Lear."

One dare not venture to say that the author of "Semiramis" is a Shakespeare in embryo, but it may be said with much show of truth that her book is the most interesting volume of plays brought out by an American in many years, and, almost the only American poetic dramas worthy of the name. Just what she will achieve in the future depends not so much upon herself as upon her opportunities for beholding her plays in concrete form upon the stage with her characters interpreted by efficient actors.

The complaint that there is no American drama may be true; but if it is not, it will soon be so unless American managers are willing to support the efforts towards the development of an indigenous drama. The stage and not the printing-press is the true medium of the playwright; his work can never obtain val-

idity, nor can he cast aside the crudenesses of his chrysalis state until he is permitted to do so by touch with the home of the drama, the theatre.

So long as the stage is in the hands of those whose ideas of art are so simple that they can be summed up in the words "Will it pay?" whose sole endeavor is, Midas-like, to change all things, even those of loveliness into gold, there can be no American dramatic art. Capital is always timid. It cannot afford to make experiments, even though the result should be an American Renaissance.

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